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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between animism and water. Animism can be defined as either "the belief that natural objects, natural phenomena and the universe itself possess souls, or the belief that natural objects have souls that may exist apart from their material bodies¹." Viewed in such terms, animistic religions accord water a supernatural life force. The manner in which it visualises this life force is dependent upon the specific beliefs of the people in relation to the environment that they inhabit. The range of examples for this article is not limited to one continent, but as is the case with animism, will take into account relevant beliefs from different geographical locations. Animistic religion may lead to the belief in specific water spirits, or the water itself may even be imbued with supernatural qualities, qualities which prove to be enduring despite supercedence by Islamic or Christian religion. In some cases, the influences of animism may lead to attempts to make rain, usually through the use of "medicines" to either create rain clouds or act as a supplication to a supreme being with the power to grant the needed rain. As there is a large scope for study, there will be

an attempt to highlight common features that will allow comparison between animistic religions and their relevance to water. However, the focus will not just include animism and water, but will also examine a non-animistic religion in Malawi so that contrasts and similarities can be drawn.

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Water Spirits

their Nature, Form and Abilities

Where people believe in water-spirits, these entities can take on different physical forms. These range from serpentine to human/mermaid forms. In some cases the form is interchangeable or undetermined. It can also be observed that there is a general trend of a specific form dominating certain areas, for example, as will be illustrated, the serpentine form tends to dominate in Western and Southern Africa, whilst the "mermaid" entity is especially prevalent in Northern and Central Europe.



Serpents



Mermaids



Other Forms

Serpents

A well-publicised example of a water-spirit is that of the Nyaminyami of the Tonga people. The spirit is believed to inhabit the Zambezi River between Zimbabwe and Zambia. The Tonga (who lived on both banks of the river before their forced removal with the construction of the Kariba dam) regarded him as a god. Although only a few sightings have been claimed, his physical form is serpentine, with a snake's body and head similar to that of a Tiger fish. In times of hunger, he acted as a protector to the Tonga, giving them sustenance by providing strips of meat from his own body.² In return the Tonga demonstrated their allegiance with ceremonial dances in his honour.³ Nyaminyami had a wife, and together they roamed between Kariba, the Kariwa gorge and the Mana pools. However, he was separated from his wife by the building of the dam at Kariba.⁴



During the construction of the dam in 1957, the Tonga were forcibly resettled from the banks of the Zambezi to the surrounding barren highland areas. However, construction was set back by the occurrence of a millennial flood.⁵ The resulting damage was the destruction of the constructional



coffer dam. Following floods proceeded to remove the suspension footbridge and road bridge between Zambia and Zimbabwe. Further setbacks occurred including the death of eighteen workers who fell to their deaths during construction.⁶ Nyaminyami was claimed to have been involved for two reasons. He was said to be lonely as he was separated from his wife who was still residing at Mana pools, and so in his anger had caused the floods. The Tonga people had also claimed that he had acted to defend them, when they invoked his protection as an act of resistance against their forced removal. However, the Tonga also claim that the only reason that Nyaminyami did not completely destroy the Kariba project was due to the intervention of their elders to placate him so as to spare further destruction.⁷ Nevertheless, the completion of the dam and the resettlement of the Tonga people away from Kariba has not destroyed belief in Nyaminyami. Occasional earth tremors are felt in the region. These are believed to be caused by the wandering of Nyaminyami, lonely and still wishing to be reunited with his wife. This, furthermore, will eventually be accomplished by the destruction of the dam.⁸

The Congo River provides us with another example of serpentine gods. It was believed that the river was inhabited by a family of water spirits in the form of four serpents. They were not only responsible for conditions and phenomenon on the river, they also were attributed the status of creator gods:

"Four spirits resided in the water beneath the rapids in the Congo River, in the form of four serpents, Kuitikuiti the Waving one, his wife Mboze the Fertile one, and their children Makanga and Mbatilanda. They lived in the Infernal Cauldron, as the white men call it, the maelstrom where the powerful current of the Congo meets the rising tide at every noon. The people say that Kuitikuiti has been seen in many other parts of the river as well.

Long ago there was only the earth with the bushes on it. Then Kuitikuiti rose out of the water and created all the tail-less animals, and Mbatilanda created all the animals with tails. When they came home they found that Mboze was pregnant. She had committed incest with her son, Makanga. Furious, Kuitikuiti seized a club and beat her to death. Dying, she gave birth to a serpent daughter, called Bunzi. Bunzi is the goddess of rain and fertility. She gave birth to another water spirit called Lusunzi, who comes to visit his mother regularly, and whenever he does, there is -kalema-, springtide, in the vast estuary of the Congo.

*Kuitikuiti resuscitated his wife Mboze, but now her skin was white instead of black, so he also exchanged his black skin for a white one. Kuitikuiti also lay with his granddaughter, Bunzi, and the issue of this union was a daughter, Kambizi the Storm, who floods the low lands of the delta and drags the sailors and bathers down so that they drown. On the bottom of the sea she makes love with them, like the princesses of the old days who had the right to pick any man they fancied to satisfy their desires."*⁹

As can be observed from this, the river gods were not exempt from taboo practices such as incest or murder. Indeed the fruit of the incestuous union between mother and son results in the goddess of rain and fertility. They show examples of benevolence in creating the animals that inhabit the world, but could equally be responsible for such malignant acts as drowning men or sending floods. They reflect human nature in possessing both good and bad natures. There is no strict dichotomy of good and evil. For example the creator Kuitikuiti committed murder in killing his wife Mboze, yet he demonstrates forgiveness and regret and brings her back to life. However, despite his action against his wife for her incest, he himself sleeps with his granddaughter Bunzi, product of the initial incestuous act!



One finds in Lesotho a number of animistic beliefs despite the prevalence of Christianity; indeed, it is an example on how existing beliefs can be assimilated and survive despite the best efforts of a proselytising religion. The deep points of lakes or rivers are held to contain monsters or snakes that hypnotise people into entering the water and drowning, these areas are called *koeetsengs*.¹⁰ Subsequently, there is a fear of approaching the water in areas of Lesotho.



The San of the Central Kalahari believe in an evil god !Kaonxa responsible for death. For them, there is, "a subterranean realm, occupied by these spirits (g/amadzi) and "monsters" or "angry things" (/a:xudzi) who surface and "impinge on human lives when angered by the breaking of certain taboos" (Silberbauer 1982:113). Valiente-Noailles (1993:196-99) obtained a detailed account of !kaonxa as the source of evil from a //gana man. !Kaonxa was described as "coming back" from the west; he became a big snake and was said to be still alive (indeed, immune to death). He was said to be living "in

places where there is big water. And when a person comes to get water he may just splash him a lot of water and dig him into the water" [i.e. drown him]. He is the "master of all illnesses" and brings violent winds and rainstorms (Valiente-Noailles 1993:196). He is also associated with the //gamahare, or spirits of the dead."¹¹ The Khoisan believe in a rain being called !Khwa. "In /Xam lore, !Khwa is the embodiment of the rain and of the water in the water hole, his home; he is particularly linked to violent and dangerous rain storms. Like the Nharo /gauwa, he is attracted to women (Guenther 1989:117) and is particularly linked to initiation (amongst the /Xam, female initiation). Most of the !Khwa stories pivot on his attraction to female initiates in seclusion. One narrator, Dia!kwain, described drowned female initiates as "the water's wives" (Bleek and Lloyd 1911:395). !Khwa appears in herbivorous form, including

the eland, or, generically as a rain animal or rain bull."¹² !Khwa is viewed a wrathful deity, and his punishment for wrongdoing, especially breaking taboos is severe. "The girl's story; the frog's story" (Bleek and Lloyd 1911:198-205) exemplifies the tenor of the menarcheal stories. A female initiate, unhappy in menarcheal seclusion and with the associated food rationing and taboos, sneaked off to the waterhole, killed a "water's child" (described as "like a calf") and cooked and ate it while her relatives were out foraging. On her next attempt, an angry !Khwa enveloped her in a whirlwind and deposited her in the waterhole, where she was drowned. Frogs and reflections of stars on the surfaces of the water were said to be disobedient initiates abducted and killed by !Khwa. Her family was likewise afflicted - abducted, drowned and turned into frogs. Their possessions revert to an unworked state: mats and arrows become grasses and reeds respectively. In a similar narrative, skin karosses revert to being springbok (L V-20:5612-5617)."¹³ As can be observed, !Khwa possesses the ability to change his form at will, and was not only responsible for the providence of rain but the observance of rites and taboos. Viewed in such terms, !Khwa is not only a rain-giver, but also a death-giver. His abode is the waterhole, which is seen in terms of a gate between the worlds of the living and the dead. "The waterhole in /Xam myths and stories is primarily a place of death and the home of the death-giver, !Khwa (Solomon 1989, 1992a, 1994). It is this symbolism which, I propose, supports Qing's contention that the painted rhebok-headed figures [found in rock art] represented men who had died and now lived in rivers. In terms of /Xam mythology, death and underwater are equivalents. In Lewis-Williams' argument, "underwater" describes the sensations of trance experience; however, a strong case may be made for the reverse, namely that trancers or curers construe their experience as a journey to the realm of sickness and death, conceptualised as a nether realm accessed through the waterhole, the home of the death-giver, !Khwa. (The curer's task in the underworld is to wrestle with the spirits who cause illness.)"¹⁴ As well as the importance of the waterhole, and the equivalence of underwater and death, one can also note that rivers are believed to be inhabited by spirits of the dead, and the conception of curing illness by combating spirits through the medium of trance, trance itself being equivocated with "underwater".



Lake Fundudzi in the Northern Province of South Africa is treated as sacred. The only natural lake in South Africa is fed by the Mutale River. There are several different beliefs held about it, one of which being that it is inhabited by a god of fertility in the form of a python. As is the case in other animistic religions, ancestors are employed as intermediaries between the people and the god. They are invoked by a ritual in which a maiden with a pot of beer is sent into the lake. "She must then pour the beer into the water and if the water and beer mixes it is going to be a good season. If not, then other measures must be employed to enlist the help of the ancestral spirits to have a good season."¹⁵



Outside of Africa, the form of the water-spirit is rarely a snake. However, in Russia, there is a folktale of a snake and a Russian girl. The snake inhabited a pond and wished to marry the girl. The girl was abducted from her home after promising to marry the snake without any intention of honouring her pledge. This was achieved by a mass of snakes breaking into her house and carrying her off to the pond, where underwater they took human form and the girl had two children by her husband."¹⁶

Mermaids



In Northern and Central Europe there is a trend for the physical form of the water-spirit to be half or wholly human. In cases where they are half human, their lower body tends to be that of a fish. On the west coast of Ireland, the merrow was a form of mermaid, the sighting of whom heralded the coming of gales. Some were believed to have taken humans as partners. They also possessed the ability to metamorphose into little hornless cows when taken to wandering on land.¹⁷



In the Baltic region, Votian beliefs included the presence of water-spirits of both sexes in the sea, rivers, springs and lakes. The fishermen regarded them as the guardians of fish. These beings, half human, half fish, were supplicated by fishermen anxious for a good catch and safe trip, as some of the spirits were held to either prevent catches or to cause boats to lose their way. Offerings of a first catch or the head of a black cat were commonplace.¹⁸ Water-spirits, whether at sea, or in lakes and rivers, could also be malignant. They were held as the cause of drowning. In many cases it was believed that spirits of the opposite sex to the victim(s) carried out the drowning. In these cases, "the water-spirit as an empirical supernatural being could be perceived for only a short period of time: a criterion for the supernatural is the sudden disappearance of an anthropomorphic being, particularly when an observer happens to expose its proximity. References to the places where spirits were most often seen or were believed to live are more general. Such places in bodies of water could be, for example, sites where water suddenly swirls upstream, sites with a deep bottom or those where people had drowned. Although the time of the water spirit's appearance is often unspecified we should note that in several reports and memorates the supernatural event has taken place at high noon."¹⁹



Water-spirits were also held to be responsible for the drowning of livestock. In such cases, attempts were again made to placate the water-spirit with animal sacrifice and monetary offering so that the entity would not deprive the community of this important resource. A distinction has been made between the water-spirits of the sea and those of the inland rivers, springs and lakes. Based on the different environmental circumstances, experiences and concerns of the fishing and agricultural communities, the water-spirits were accorded different natures. Whilst the fishing community held that the water-spirits had a clear form and tended to be occasionally malign, but on the whole once placated, benevolent, the agricultural community treated the spirits as demons. "Observing the tradition of water spirits in Estonian folk religion Ivar Paulson (1971) argues that according to the religious phenomenology the guardian spirits of fish, mother of waters and images of animate, personified bodies of water are relevant for the fishermen's ecotype. The demonic water spirits are but characteristic of the beliefs of agricultural and cattle-breeding people."²⁰



In Poland and Germany, there was a belief in the water-man or nix and his wife. He possessed a human form, with a malevolent nature. Inhabiting lakes, rivers and ponds he "tempts passers-by to go bathing, in order to drown them. This he does to everyone who trespasses into his domain while bathing. Blue spots on a drowned person's body are a sign that the nixes caused the drowning."²¹ He was held to be powerless on land, and like the Irish merrow, he could interact with humans and was indistinguishable from them. To have observed his wife on the banks of a river bleaching her laundry was an omen of rainy weather or high water. He and his wife were also held to be responsible for price fluctuations for products (butter and grain) that they sold at the market.²²

Animistic beliefs in water-spirits were not simply confined to the regions where the beliefs originated. In essence, the water-spirits could travel with peoples, even across vast distances from continent to continent. The Atlantic slave trade running between West Africa and the colonies of North America not only transported beleaguered peoples, but their belief systems as well. For this reason, water-spirits almost human in form by the name of "cymbees" inhabited springs in the Low-country of South-Carolina. These spirits were very similar to those believed to exist amongst indigenous peoples inhabiting the Congo, who feared the power of the "simbi" spirits.²³ The "simbi" spirits, (plural Bisimbi), of the Congo were those of ancestors,

who over time lost links to the community to become general guardians of certain regions. They had great power and were feared, "Truly they have great power and authority, for their power is revealed by the force they show in the water and in the gullies. They stir up very high winds and unleash tornadoes, so that the bodies of people are filled with fear and trembling. They break people's courage and render it feeble, weak, limp, petrified, hollow and fevered; they are stunned and grovel in terror. This is how the *Bisimbi* show their strength: if they see someone come to draw water from the pool where they reside, they rise to the surface and cover it with foam and turbulence, turning and twisting. So the person drawing the water is scared stiff when she sees how the water boils in the pool. She may tumble into the water because she is dizzy. If she does not cry out so that those who remain in the village hear her, when next they meet her she may be dead."²⁴



The water-spirits of the springs of South Carolina were based on these beliefs, and were adapted over time. The water-spirits were as feared as the *Bisimbi* of West Africa and threatened "especially in instances when individuals (usually women) tried to draw water or children endeavoured to swim in the springs. Enslaved people described the spirits as vaguely human in form, each possessing unique characteristics, and later informants related various names for the spirits such as The Evil, One-Eye (at Eutaw, Pooshee, and Lang Syne plantations), and The Great Desire of the Unrotting Waters. Indeed, from these accounts "cymbees" appear to fit within the category of malevolent spirits that populated the Low-country's forest and swamps and included such spectres as Plat-Eyes, "conjur-horses," and spirit bears."²⁵



The North American Indians also believe that the rivers and lakes contain water-spirits. They treat water with great respect, and recognise its many uses. In doing so, they not only give offerings to a creator god, but also to the water-spirits by giving tobacco, food and gifts. Water plays an important role in their beliefs, and responsibility for it is held to have been delegated to women by the creator god. As an example, "'When babies are born, that water comes first. It clears a path for our babies to travel to mother earth . . . The teachings tell us to treat that water and all of her aspects as you would your mother.'

'It's the woman's responsibility to teach her daughters and grand-daughters to make offerings to the water spirits. The water spirits, in turn, will take care of children playing in the water, whether they are swimming or skiing.' "²⁶ Therefore, in return for supplicatory offerings, the water-spirits give protection. The water-spirits in this case do not have any specific form.

Other Forms



Bodies of water are not necessarily inhabited by a specific entity with a certain physical form or nature. Instead, they may contain an undetermined number of spirits or ghosts. These cases, again, can be found all over the world.

In Scotland, deep pools were held to be inhabited by water demons, or guardian spirits, who on the whole tended to be malevolent. In cases of the sack of a castle, the laird's precious possessions may have been thrown into a nearby deep pool for protection. "On one occasion a diver was going to the bottom of such a pool to fetch up the plate of the neighbouring castle. He dived, saw the plate chest, and was preparing to lift it, when the demon ordered him to go to the surface at once, and not to come back. At the same time the demon warned him that, if he did come back, he would forfeit his life. The diver obeyed. When he reached the bank he told what he had seen, and what he had heard. By dint of threats and promises of large reward, he dived again. In a moment or two afterwards his heart and lungs rose and floated on the surface of the water. They had been torn out by the demon of the pool."²⁷



Another example of the interaction of animistic beliefs with Christianity can be found in Germany, "At the time of Burkhard, the twenty-seventh archbishop of Magdeburg, who served from the year 1295 to the year 1304, this lake was filled with spirits and ghosts. They often



frightened the fishermen and boatsmen, and caused them much harm, drowning and causing the miserable death of many a man. When Archbishop Burkhard, a very pious and God-fearing man, heard of this, he went to the lake with great sincerity, and blessed the place, driving the evil spirits away, and they have never been seen there again."²⁸

In the Venda region of the Northern Province of South Africa, the people maintain their all important relations with their ancestors by means of placating the water spirits by leaving offerings at "the Phiphidi Falls and in Gubukhuvo, the pool into which the water flow below the falls. Although these water sprites can trap their own meat, they cannot grow grain under water and therefore beer and grain are left on a sacred stone near the top of the falls to foster good relations with the ancestral spirits."²⁹

Water-spirits, usually inhabiting springs and streams, in the Baltic area were believed to be able to cause illness. According to Votian thinking, by making offerings to the spirits and asking for forgiveness at the springs or streams, one could be cured.³⁰ The belief in the healing power of the spirits in springs was not just limited to the Baltic, it was a common phenomenon across Europe. However, with the coming of Christianity, the springs became rededicated to the cult of the Saints. In some cases where the indigenous belief was strong, the Church simply made the god or goddess a saint, (as in the case of Saint Bridget in Ireland) and assimilated the local belief. Those suffering from illness still came to the spring for healing although the credit went to a Church sanctioned saint instead. There are many contemporary springs at which people still flock in hope of cure, Lourdes in France being only one of them.



Animistic Properties of Water

Aside from the presence of water-spirits, the water itself may possess supernatural properties of its own. These can be healing, harmful or protective qualities. The belief in these qualities can exist alongside the major religions of Christianity or Islam, illustrating the resilient nature of animistic religion.



The waters of the previously mentioned Lake Fundudzi in South Africa are held to have supernatural qualities. Only a maiden can enter the waters to give the offering of beer to the ancestors to intercede for them with the python god of fertility. "No one is allowed to look at the lake directly – one must look through your legs at the lake – and no one is allowed to touch the water – your skin will break out in sores if you do so.

³¹ The reputed harmful nature no doubt adds to the sacredness of the lake.

In North American Indian religion, water in the form of a vapour bath has a cleansing effect on the soul. It was also held to have a healing and restorative effect, being used to bring the first man back to life. "In our Creation myth or story of the First Man, the vapour-bath was the magic used by The-one-who-was-First-Created, to give life to the dead bones of his younger brother, who had been slain by the monsters of the deep. Upon the shore of the Great Water he dug two round holes, over one of which he built a low enclosure of fragrant cedar boughs, and here he gathered together the bones of his brother. In the other pit he made a fire and heated four round stones, which he rolled one by one into the



lodge of boughs. Having closed every aperture save one, he sang a mystic chant while he thrust in his arm and sprinkled water upon the stones with a bunch of sage. Immediately steam arose, and as the legend says, "there was an appearance of life." A second time he sprinkled water, and the dry bones rattled together. The third time he seemed to hear soft singing from within the lodge; and the fourth time a voice exclaimed: "Brother, let me out!" (It should be noted that the number four is the magic or sacred number of the Indian.)³² Water-worn boulders are regarded as sacred, the 'eneepee,' (vapour-bath) is used by the doctor, and is followed by a cold plunge into water. It is used on occasions of imminent danger, possible death or spiritual crisis.³³



Water could also be used for protective purposes against evil spirits or designs. There was a long tradition in Germany, predating the Reformation of using holy water to protect oneself and one's goods and belongings. On buying holy water from the priest, one could hang it around the neck in an amulet to ward off evil spirits, or put it above the door of the house to keep them from entering. Livestock could be brought to the church to drink from a trough of holy water so that protection could be gained for them also. The walls and roof of a house would regularly be blessed by a priest with holy water to imbue it with resistance to any misfortune. The priest would bless the boundaries of the parish with holy water to ward off plague and evil spirits. These well established practices did not die out overnight, and are good examples of how Christianity could gain animistic qualities.³⁴



In African communities dependent on the resource of regular, adequate rainfall, animism allows for a process of rainmaking with the use of "medicines" in times of drought, and also provides for the darker medicines for preventing rain from falling on one's enemies. By use of "medicines," an appeal can be made straight to a supreme being with need of intercession from the ancestral spirits.

The San of Lesotho made a direct appeal to the god !Khwa by use of a blood sacrifice, "which entailed medicine men of the rain capturing a rain animal by enticing it from its home in the waterhole. It would be slaughtered, and where its blood ran, rain would fall."³⁵ It would appear in this case that the blood of the animal, usually an eland or a rain bull represented the rain that they hoped would fall.

Modjadji the Rain Queen of the Lobedu mountains in South Africa was, as her name illustrates, famous for her rainmaking abilities. "Her history can be traced back to Zimbabwe 400 years ago. She was a princess that had to escape her father's wrath after having fallen pregnant by her half-brother. Her mother helped her to steal her father's rainmaking medicine and with this and some of her followers she fled south. Eventually they came to settle in the mountains at the cycads forest, first at Lebjene and then where her royal enclosure is now. Here the Modjadji (as she was called) practised her rainmaking and as her reputation grew, her influence began to spread. As water is a scarce commodity in Africa all the other groups thought twice before messing with the Rain Queen. As a result, the Bolebedu people were unaffected by the many wars that ripped through the area and eventually the members of the Boer Republic of the Transvaal visited her."³⁶ Her example demonstrates the great political potential that rainmaking could have. To be denied water by your enemies would spell disaster. As such her "medicines" gave her kingdom greater power than it could otherwise have expected. Particular value is given to the person of the Queen herself, who is trained to succeed her predecessor. On death, some of her skin is added to the "medicines" to maintain their power.





The information for this article has been taken from the book by Brian Morris, "Animals and Ancestors. An Ethnography", (2000.) His book is based on the matrilineal peoples of Malawi, the Chewa, Chipeta, Nyanja, Mang'anja, Yao, Lomwe and Tumbuka. Their importance to this article is that they possess a non-animistic religion that allows comparison with what has been previously written.

Their world is essentially a dichotomous one. In their polar world, there are two principle elements of hot, (da'a) and cold, (a i). Everything belongs to one element or the other:

Hot

Men
Sun
Day
Fire

Cold

Women
Moon
Night
Water

They are not, as has already been stated, animist. This is because, "Malawians affirm that humans are 'animals', but animals are not necessarily 'persons', either in the ontological sense, or normatively, even though in specific contexts spirits may take animal form (lion, puff adder, python) and thus the animals may be conceptualised as 'persons' (as chief or a grandparent.) Only spirits, (or humans with special powers - medicines) not animals have the ability to transform themselves into other forms of being."³⁷ As animals, (or for that case plants, stones or water) are not held to possess a soul, the Malawians are not an animistic religion.

They possess a supreme being, whose name in Chewa is Chiuta. This supreme being is not an interventionist god. "Only in 'calamitous circumstances' was assistance sought from the deity - yet dependent as people are on agriculture, and on rainfall in the appropriate amounts and at appropriate times - the relationship between humans and the supreme being has never been too distant."³⁸ As social and individual wellbeing in rural Malawi is fundamentally focused on agricultural prosperity, and this is dependent on the fertility of the land and a controlled supply of rain, he is the deity to whom the people turn when the rains fail (he manifests his presence through the provision of rain).³⁹ The Malawians regard water and fire as two creative transformations. Both are associated with important processes - the social and ecological cyclic processes.⁴⁰ Whilst rainfall, as has already been mentioned, is important in regard to agriculture, fire is important in hunting. The men use fire to drive animals out of the bush when hunting. The smoke produced by these fires has great importance. "The smoke from bushfires form the rain clouds that eventually bring rain...Schoffealers suggest that the myth embodies an implicit cosmology, with several important symbolic contrasts: between earth and sky, water and fire, and between downward and upward movements."⁴¹ This fits perfectly into the dichotomous world in which the Malawians live.



Certain animals are associated with the rains and the supreme being. "The Nile monitor...often shares its name, chiuta. According to Schoffealers this lizard - the largest in Africa - is thought of living above the clouds and is linked to such phenomena as lightening and thunder. The monitor is highly sought after for medicine and its skin is the only one used for the sacred drums of the Mbona rain cult."⁴²



One animal that is not killed, but on the contrary is treated with utmost respect is the python or nsato. This is because it is believed to be the physical manifestation of a spirit, which is also associated with the rains. To kill one, and leave it unburied would bring madness and death upon the perpetrator and drought and disaster upon the village as Chiuta would withhold the rains. If it should happen, it must be buried with black chicken feathers and black cloth placed on top of the grave.⁴³ The symbolism of this will be dealt with later. A great python-like serpent spirit called Thunga, "habitually lived in the mountains or in some deep sacred pool, and it was seen as moving from place to place and as controlling the rains. Thunga was associated with the mountains and hills throughout the central region."⁴⁴ If Chiuta tended not to interfere directly, then Thunga was definitely an interventionist spirit, actively in charge of rainfall. The hills and mountains are important for two reasons. They tend to be the charge of the spirits of powerful chiefs, who were used as mediators with Chiuta. The hills are also home to many rain shrines dedicated to Thunga and his namesakes. These were run by a celibate priestess or spirit-medium who was the earthly representative of either Chiuta's or Thunga's wife, depending on the shrine and region. She acted as a direct conduit to either the supreme being or Thunga, and was responsible for enacting rainmaking rituals with the aid of local chiefs. Sacred pools play a prominent role in the location of rain shrines, acting as a home for the travelling serpent-spirit. Hunting was forbidden in such areas, as it is a "hot" activity, likewise sexually active adults were not allowed to approach the shrine in order to conserve its "cool" status which encouraged the rains (again "cool"). In some shrines during the rainmaking ritual, the spirit-medium was decorated with black and white spots using flour and charcoal to represent clouds and a balanced rainfall.⁴⁵ "Only black/dark, (wokunda) cloth and animals were accepted as offerings at the shrine, and the animals were killed using a short stabbing spear, (kathungo.) Offerings were reduced to ashes, then cast into the sacred pool of Malawi."⁴⁶ Black was an important colour as it symbolised rain clouds, and the smoke from the offering was believed to ascend and cause rain clouds.



Another serpent-spirit, Napolo, is rarely invoked by the Malawians. It is also held that the person that observed him would die. On the whole he tends to be viewed of as a "huge subterranean serpent-spirit, associated with water. It is invisible, but it has the form of a huge snake, (njoka,) and is active like a wild animal (chirombo) destroying people and property as it makes its way, at intervals, to the lake."⁴⁷ The spirit, tending to move between Michesi Mountain and Lake Chilwa seems similar to the Nyaminyami of the Tonga. However, this serpent-spirit brings only destruction. It is associated with torrential rains and flash floods that destroy anything in their path. The last time that Napolo was believed to have struck was in March 1991, when an immense flash flood destroyed bridges and the town of Phalombe, resulting in the deaths of around 470 people out of a population of 21 000.



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